



Albania

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,100 square miles and a population of 3.6 million. No reliable data were available on religious participation or membership; the last official census including such data was held in 1939. The majority of citizens do not actively practice a faith; however, the four traditional religious groups are Muslim (Sunni), Bektashi (a form of Shi'a Sufism), Orthodox Christian (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania), and Roman Catholic. In addition, there are substantial numbers of Protestant denominations and other religious groups, including Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The State Committee on Cults reported a total of 245 religious groups, organizations, and foundations in addition to the four traditional religious groups. This number included 34 Islamic organizations and 189 Protestant organizations, mostly associated with the Albanian Evangelical Alliance (VUSH).

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Government is secular. According to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. Official holidays include holy days of all four predominant faiths.

The Government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups; however, the State Committee on Cults maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organizations that contact it for assistance. Religious

movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts and own property. Tax-exempt status was granted during the reporting period to the four traditional religious communities; however, because of new agreements reached with the Government on October 24, 2008, they are required to reregister as a religious community in order to qualify. Other religious groups without bilateral agreements with the Government continued to petition for tax-exempt status.

The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the Government and religious communities as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting interreligious cooperation and understanding. The committee claims that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization reported any difficulty obtaining residency permits during the reporting period. However, as a general rule, foreign missionaries were issued one-year residency permits instead of the five-year permits allowed by law for residents in the country for more than two years. The committee continued working with the Government on criteria that would allow residency permits of up to five years for well-established religious organizations with long-term ties to the country.

Article 10 of the Constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious communities. On October 24, 2008, the Government signed agreements with the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. The Catholic Church has had such an agreement with the Government since 2002. VUSH, a Protestant umbrella organization, has asked to conclude a bilateral agreement. Among the advantages of having the agreement are an official recognition of the community, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions. Government financial support and state-subsidized clergy salaries are to be implemented based on a law on the financing of religious communities passed on June 5, 2009.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations had 103 affiliated associations and foundations, with 101 of those managing 101 educational institutions, of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools. By law the Ministry of Education must license these schools, and curriculums must comply with national education standards. The Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems obtaining licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church and the Bektashis operated strictly religious educational centers for the training of clerics.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There is no law prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols. School principals have the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which at times included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. During the reporting period, three female public high school students were prevented from attending classes for wearing headscarves.

The Government continued to address claims from each of the four traditional religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims remained unresolved. With the newly signed bilateral agreements, the State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property was instructed to give priority to properties owned by religious communities.

The Orthodox Church continued construction of a new cathedral in Tirana on land that it received as compensation for land seized by the communist government, but it cited lack of action on other property claims throughout the country.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church included in their restitution claims religious icons and precious manuscripts seized by the communist government that remained in the national archives.

The Albanian Islamic Community continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land that was returned to the community through the post-communist restitution process. The request remained under consideration by the Municipality of Tirana.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, nor were any substantial acts of vandalism reported.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. Embassy supported the efforts of the State Committee on Cults to develop and complete bilateral agreements between the state and some religious communities. Embassy officials were active in promoting religious tolerance, sponsoring interfaith centers in the cities of Shkoder, Elbasan, and Tirana and engaging young persons, women, and other community members in joint activities such as seminars and community gatherings.

During the reporting period, the Embassy sent one prominent religious leader to the United States through the International Visitor Leadership Program. Embassy officials continued to urge the Government to address religious property claims and return buildings, land, and other property to religious groups that lost them under communist rule.